

VERDI'S DON CARLO - A MASTERPIECE OF MUSIC THEATRE

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I have been acquainted with *Don Carlo* for a long time. Schiller's dramatic poem was standard school material, though when I was young I was more taken with *The Robbers*. Schiller's dramatic poem with its vivid portrayal of the conflict between liberalism and authoritarianism obviously touched some of Verdi's most deeply held convictions and he made a great musical drama out of it. Far from losing dramatic quality, it gained in stature. Verdi composed music of quite extraordinary psychological clarity and depth. In *Don Carlo* he created a compelling vehicle through which he could talk about humankind's universal struggle against tyranny.

Fundamentally a political man of the *Risorgimento*, many of his works deal with political themes and the freeing of people from an oppressor of some sort. The political context of *Don Carlo* is shown through the prism of a thwarted love story. But Carlos and Elisabeth are far from being Romeo and Juliet. Elisabeth has already decided to accept her fate and marry whoever is chosen for her. She does not have the strength of character to resist the weight of such social pressure. As soon as the ink has dried on her marriage certificate she becomes queen and is doomed to be unhappy.

We see in the opera *Don Carlo* the absence of and desire for freedom made manifest on many levels. *Libertà* is a very significant word in the piece, although it is uttered, if I have counted it correctly, only four times. That isn't much, but it means a lot, for one sees just how precious and dangerous this idea is. When freedom is suppressed, the longing for it becomes all the more intense. Freedom in *Don Carlo* remains an as yet unattained ideal. It is not simply about the struggle for freedom for the people of the Flanders, it is about the quest for the self determination of each and every individual man and woman, the basic prerequisite of which is equality. The characters in the opera suffer because they are not free and they are not free because they are not equal.

The character of King Philip represents the entire system of autocratic oppression which is not simply a historical phenomenon, but very much alive in the world today. Philip holds all the levers of absolute power which can tolerate no criticism nor dissent. The expression of individual opinion in this environment is an act of heroism.

We are witness to a gigantic clash between two thoroughly incompatible organising principles. By setting the opera in an earlier historical period we are able to see more

clearly the universality of the power relationships at play and appreciate this deeper structural struggle. But it is also informative to find a historical setting closer to us in time so we can relate to the characters more easily. If we put people in costumes from the Spanish 16th century very few will understand that particular political background. Who associates the wearing of a old style of trousers with the spreading of humanism and Luther's ideas in central Europe? With King Philip II the Spanish kingdom had experienced its greatest expansion, after which it slowly disintegrated. A comparable period can be seen in the run up to WWI, when great empires found themselves in conflict with the rising democratic aspirations of their populations. By setting *Don Carlo* at some near distance to the present day we retain the necessary objectivity whilst simultaneously realising it to be actually quite close to home.

The Autodafé is a throw back to the convention of *Grand Opéra* which demands at this juncture a large choral tableau. Verdi and his librettist make the most of this and have the central confrontation between father and son, which in Schiller's version takes place in private, take place in the public arena while the condemned are to be led across the square in front of the cathedral. The juxtaposition of the seductive but arbitrary pomp and ceremony with images of the brutality underpinning the whole edifice should jarr and lay bare the two main mechanisms serving to cement the power of the few over the many. This is the empty pomp which Elisabeth sings of.

The work superficially presents a conflict of religions but issues of faith are not central to the opera. Although he was not an atheist Verdi was against the Church as an institution. He saw the pretext of religion as an excuse for something else. At first the challenges to despotic rule are uncoordinated and unsure but throughout the opera the pressure from below steadily increases. At the climax of the duet between the Grand Inquisitor and Philip, the Inquisitor accuses Philip of weakness, warning him that he will ruin the Inquisitor's work with his weakening of resolve. Not ruin religion, not ruin the church or God, but *his work!* No wonder that at this point he breaks off the conversation and leaves the room. What seems to be a conflict of faith is and was (also in the history with regards Flanders) above all a struggle for power.

Still, the individual characters are at the heart of the drama of this opera. They speak to each other but they do not speak with each other. Each one of them remains more or less isolated in his or her own thoughts, experiences and feelings. There is little concerted action. It is as if all are stumbling in the dark. All the characters in this opera are lonely.

The historical Philip has been read in various ways; some historians and dramatists see him as a murdering psychopath while others believe he was an uncompromising, cold, bureaucratic protector of the Spanish kingdom. Between these extremes are many shades of

grey. What matters to us is Verdi's Philip. He is a brutal authoritarian. In the aria at the beginning of the fourth act we do not find out whether he loves the queen; we are only confronted with his egocentricity: he only wonders does the queen love him. But Philip is equally trapped. He sings of his sadness and predicts he will die alone. This is in stark contrast to Posa who in the act of dying sings of his happiness! Posa's death is the catalyst for change. Recognising Posa's higher moral integrity and selfless bravery the king begins to waver. In the *lacrimosa*, in which he mourns the death of Marquis de Posa, he finally expresses love and admiration. The longing for salvation and forgiveness seem prescient and emancipation seems to be tantalisingly close. But Philip is answerable to an even higher authority – power itself – the Grand Inquisitor. The counterrevolution is doubly brutal.

What is left for Don Carlo? For the sensitive, highly strung and heart broken prince there is only one escape from his terrible reality. If we translate the stage directions: *Carlo Quinto – trascina nel chiostro, Don Carlo smarrito* then the salvation offered by the voice of Charles V to his grandson is an offer of escape into insanity, into a dream life on the other side of reality made up of memories from the most beautiful times in his life: his time spent in Fontainebleau, his innocent youth with his friend Posa and the dream of loving Elisabeth in another life.

Don Carlo is Verdi's longest opera and an astounding work. Despite the passionate admiration of some opera *connoisseurs*, *Don Carlo* had long been considered a problematic opera and only from the second half of the 20th century was it reappraised as one of the best and most revolutionary of Verdi's scores combining unrestrained power and drive with exceptional refinement, subtle differentiation of psychological insight and emotional intelligence. One feels that every note has been composed out of the musico-dramatic necessity. It is a rare masterpiece of music theatre.